A tortoise is a terrestrial turtle belonging to the Testudinidae family, Testudines order, and Cryptodira suborder. They are one of the longest living animals in the world.

Background

- Tortoise is the word referred to slow, terrestrial turtles. This was determined by the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists.
- Tortoises and turtles have existed since 300 million years ago.
- They inhabit places with a semi-arid climate.

Physical Characteristics

- A tortoise’s shell is not a single shell, but rather a composition of 60 bony plates.
- The top part is called a carapace and the underside is called a plastron.
- Both sides are joined by a bridge.
- The top carapace has scales on it called scutes.
- Scutes protect the shell plates from getting injured.
Tortoises can hide their head, feet, and tail in their shell.
A tortoise has a collarbone, ribs, and a spine inside its shell.
Their shells are very sensitive.
Tortoises are able to feel anything that touches their shells, even if you touch it very softly.
You can tell the age of a tortoise by the rings around its scutes.
The color of a tortoise’s shell is telling to its place of origin.
Tortoises with light-colored shells come from warmer places.
The sulcata, for instance, has a light tan shell and it comes from the Sahara Desert.
Tortoises have no teeth so they chew their food using ridges in their tough mouths.
Tortoises have no ears, but they have two tiny holes on the sides of their heads.
On the roof of their mouths is what is called the Jacobson’s organ.
The Jacobson’s organ is a vomeronasal organ that allows tortoises to have a sharp sense of smell.
Tortoises can smell even the faintest of scents.
They circulate air that passes through their nose by pumping their throats.
Tortoises are sensitive to bright colors.
A tortoise’s feet can draw heat from the ground.
Tortoise

Other Characteristics

▪ Although tortoises can’t swim, they can hold their breath underwater for long periods of time because they’re able to tolerate carbon dioxide.
▪ Tortoises are cold-blooded and get warmth from their environment. This is why they like sunbathing.
▪ Tortoises are diurnal, meaning they’re active in the day and asleep at night.
▪ Tortoises are mostly herbivorous.
▪ Not all turtles are tortoises.
▪ Tortoises are mainly terrestrial while turtles are mostly water-dwelling.
▪ The main physical difference of turtles and tortoises are their feet and shells.
▪ Tortoises have short, thick feet like those of an elephant’s while turtles have webbed feet for swimming.
▪ A tortoise’s shell is heavier and more rounded while a turtle’s shell is lighter and flat.
▪ Tortoises are often loners.
▪ Tortoises are experts at getting all the water and nutrients they need from what they eat.
▪ Their hindgut system separates water from waste, which is handy when water is scarce and they need to rely on water from their waste.
▪ A tortoise’s sex can only be seen when it reaches a certain size.
▪ However, there are other ways to tell if a tortoise is male or female: by their shells and by their tails.
▪ Females generally have flatter plastrons and males tend to have longer tails.
▪ Females can lay eggs even without a male partner to fertilize them.
Tortoise

Species

▪ The largest tortoise species is the Galapagos tortoise which can weigh up to 440 pounds and grow up to 1.2 meters long.
▪ The Aldabra giant tortoise, found in the Aldabra atoll in Seychelles, is one of the largest tortoises in the world.
▪ The African spurred tortoise, also known as the sulcata, is the third largest tortoise and one of the most popular to have as a pet.
▪ The sulcata is found in the Sahara desert and weighs up to 200 pounds and lives for up to 100 years.
▪ The red-footed tortoise and the yellow-footed tortoise from South America are often kept as pets.
▪ The Indian star tortoise is an endangered species from India and Sri Lanka.
▪ The pancake tortoise is the species with a flattened shell and is native to Kenya and Tanzania.

Other Facts

▪ A group of tortoises is known as a creep.
▪ The lifespan of a tortoise ranges from 90 to 250 years.
▪ Most tortoises hibernate in the winter.
▪ Tortoises hide in their shells when they’re startled.

Galapagos tortoise
African spurred tortoise
Tortoise

- Tortoises exhibit sexual dimorphism, meaning males and females are distinctly different from each other in terms of appearance.
- Females are typically larger in size than males.
- Female tortoises lay up to 30 eggs at a time.
- Females leave their eggs in deep burrows that they dig and let the eggs incubate for 90 to 120 days.
- Males try to get the attention of females for mating by ramming their shells.
- Females can store a male’s sperm for up to three or four years until they use it to fertilize their eggs.
- It is not only the tortoise’s shell that is affected by temperature but also the tortoise’s sex.
- In warmer climates, there are more female offspring.

Tortoise Trivia

- The tortoise is the symbol of the Greek god Hermes.
- Charles Darwin once had a pet Galapagos tortoise named Harriet.
- Harriet ended up in the zoo founded by the parents of Steve Irwin, the famed Crocodile Hunter.
- In 1968, the Soviet Union launched a spacecraft with tortoises on board. It went around the Earth and safely returned back.
- Sailors used to eat the meat of tortoises they captured in the Galapagos Islands.
- The Galapagos Islands were named after the Galapagos tortoises by the Spanish who found the islands in 1535.
- The ancient Roman military made use of a formation inspired by tortoises, which is called the testudo formation.
- Testudo is the Latin word for tortoise.
- The testudo formation would require soldiers to line up in rows with their shields held in front of or above them. The shields would then look like a shell that covered the whole unit.
- Objects can be called testudinal if they are shaped like or are reminiscent of a tortoise shell.
A tortoise is a ___________ turtle belonging to the Testudinidae family under the order of ___________.

They have existed since ___________ years ago.

They are one of the ___________ animals in the world.

They live in places with a ___________ climate.

They live on _______ and not water.
A tortoise is a terrestrial turtle belonging to the Testudinidae family under the order of Testudines. They have existed since 300 million years ago. They are one of the longest living animals in the world. They live in places with a semi-arid climate. They live on land and not water.
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